1 Introduction

This Element is about an exclamation point. Affixed to the word 'India' in the promotion materials of the Festival of India (1985–6) – 'an event without parallel in the history of cultural interchange between India and the United States and perhaps between the United States and any other country' (Desai, 1985) – the sign marked a pivotal period of major socio-economic and cultural change at the end of the Cold War.[1] Anticipating other landmark exhibitions such as Russia! (2006) and Armenia! (2018), the exclamation point's tonality in the advertisements of the festival superficially suggested excitement, friendliness, and immediacy, trumpeting the explosion of 'one of the biggest events ever mounted to promote goodwill and understanding between two countries' (Festival of India USA). Yet over and above infusing 'India' with human warmth, the symbol succinctly translated a constellation of highly complex historical processes for the global public: India's aspiration to transition from planned Nehruvian socialism to *laissez faire* capitalism, the interpellation of diasporic Indian identity, and the efflorescence of the model of 'cultural development'. This last was characterized by the unparalleled fusion of two hitherto distinct Cold War discourses: technocratic, *wertfrei* (value-free) development and cultural propaganda, containment, or ideological *Kulturkampf* (cultural struggle).

The festival where 'India became India!' spanned forty states and over a hundred cities; comprised more than seven hundred art exhibitions, programmes of music, dance, drama, film shows, seminars, and lectures sponsored by over two hundred cultural institutions; engendered extensive media coverage; and cost approximately $20 million (Trehan, 1985a). Of unprecedented size and near-unfathomable political, economic, and cultural influence, the multi-sited, two-year-long spectacle constituted a prismatic event that refracted the complex forces at play on the global stage during the late Cold War. Providing Americans with 'a wider and more intense exposure to India's cultural history than any but the most privileged Indians could hope for in a lifetime' (Ray, 1985: 1), the festival functioned as a strategic cultural bridge at the critical moment when the Indian and United States (US) governments sought to redefine their relations (Jain, 1988). The phallic point in the festival's exhibition titles such as the Metropolitan Museum of Art's *India!* and the Smithsonian Institution's *Mela!* (*Fair!*) functioned as a shorthand for Indian and American bureaucrats' desires to craft a 'muscular [visual] vocabulary' of a nation that was ripe for Western economic, technological, and military investment. Fortifying artistic events with, as Elena Ferrante shrewdly posits, 'the profile of a nuclear missile' (Ferrante, 2018), the mark – a symbol of the gap

[1] See (Ganguly & Mukherji, 2011) and (Kohli, 2006).

between geopolitical policy and the realization of that policy – articulated a practice of fixing the meaning of India as culturally specific and universal, exotic and familiar, modern and ancient, national and global. 'Shrimp-pink' pashminas and camel khadi linen curtains, antique ivory-inlaid elephants and turmeric-infused okra recipes (Brown, 2020) – the signs today of discrete yet cosmopolitan upper-west side wealth – constitute the residue of the deeply desirable visual scheme crafted by the Indian and US governments to enhance state-to-state relations, bolster trade and commerce, and craft and project a more positive vision of India for target tourist markets.

This Element analyses how the translation of values from the domain of geopolitics to cultural pageantry transpired. First, it demonstrates the multi-sided 'actorness' essential to the festival's staging. Blurring divisions between conceptualizations of the actor in international relations and theatre theory, the text recalibrates assumptions regarding the festival's performance and stage, its audience and its principal performers. In this way, it brings into focus a special poetics of visibility common to political, intellectual, and cultural elites. High-profile statesmen, hitherto unknown foundation officers, civil servants, key journalists, and not least folk performers and theatre artists themselves performed highly codified roles for the success of a two year-long event that 'capture[d] the imagination of a large part of the American public' even as they studiously avoided the unsavoury whiff of performance (Festival of India in the United States: 1). The Element traces the undisclosed script enacted by some of the event's chief actors within a larger diplomatic theatre. In the process, it highlights not only the complex interplay of diplomatic, commercial, and economic objectives that made its organization a bafflingly convoluted affair but also the artful dissembling characteristic of those charged with simplifying ugly geopolitical idiom into dazzlingly attractive, seemingly neutral spectacle.

Second, the Element draws attention to two overlapping modes of performance – zoological and theatrical – which were conceptualized as effective lubricants for transnational political dialogue and economic growth. Consisting of both performing arts and scholarly events as well as exhibitions and ethnographic installations of Indian rural life, the festival echoed nineteenth-century shows that blurred the boundaries between staged science, circus, living displays, and proscenium drama. But this old visual scheme was put to new use in its emphasis on art's function as a key driver of socio-economic development. The Element studies the complementarity of function of *Aditi*, *Mela!*, and *The Golden Eye* – three overlapping 'living exhibitions' celebrating traditional India – and Peter Brook's *Mahabharata*, arguably the most praised and denigrated theatrical event of the twentieth century and one of

the festival's 'major attractions' (Festival of India USA: 5). Differing in degree and not in kind, both types of performances, while emphasizing staged authenticity and the thrill of the hyperreal, introduced powerful political messages of indigeneity, contemporaneity, and universalism. 'Frightening yet somehow familiar, disturbing yet deeply desirable, lost to us but still dimly comprehended', India, as formulated by state and non-state actors such as Indira Gandhi and Peter Brook, would show the rest of the world still in the thralls of the Cold War and the threat of nuclear conflict how to thread modernity with spirituality, science with self-discovery. Obscuring the unseemly images of poverty, dust, dirt, and squalor studiously depicted in most western newsreels of India, this ingenious dramaturgical scheme that emphasized a shared humanity relevant to all time, crafted a powerful and formidable vision of India and its leadership. As a result, it enabled Indo-US dialogue on economic reforms, pro-business growth strategies, and technological investment, thereby setting the stage for Indian free markets and globalization. So too did it pre-empt the World Bank's invention of 'cultural industries'. The festival – as Rajeev Sethi, cultural advisor to the World Bank who conceptualized the scenography of *Aditi*, *Mela!*, *The Golden Eye*, and *The Mahabharata*, argued – was conceived to promote 'goods and services with social and cultural meaning, and with huge, booming market potential across the globe' and to 'strategically position the subcontinent's unique traditions of craft skills as a muscular vocabulary capable of supporting the most contemporary imagination of architects and designers anywhere' (Sethi, 2005). The Element delineates how for the first time 'intangible heritage and its service providers' (Sethi, 2005) were promoted by the highest levels of the Indian and US government as cure-alls for unsustainable consumption in the modern world, 'critical drivers articulating [meaningful] economic and social development', and brokers of a new geopolitical vision for the nation. In so doing it elucidates the significant, semi-autonomous interpenetration of cultural performance with the *realpolitik* of state-craft.

1.1 Calculated Ambiguity

Despite official declarations of shared postcolonial histories and close bonds of democratic friendship, post-independent, non-aligned India had a complex, chequered relationship with the United States. In the early 1950s, warm and friendly Indo-US diplomatic relations stemmed from the view of India and China – the world's most populous nations – as symbols of the competition between democracy and communism in the developing world. During this period, the victory of the Indian democratic experiment was deemed by the United States as essential to demonstrate the superiority of democracy over

communism in Asia. Much, however, transpired since the 1950s to cool US-Indian relations. Washington's provision of weapons to Pakistan and the US decision to cut off arms to India in the Indo-Pakistan War of 1965 led to a deeply ingrained suspicion among most Indian officials of the United States' 'reliability as a friend' (Directorate of Intelligence, 1986: 2). During the crisis decade of the 1970s, with the Nixon administration's 'tilt' towards Pakistan over Bangladesh and the subsequent rapprochement between India and the Soviet Union, US-Indian relations were at their lowest (Anderson & Spear, 1985a: 11). Consequently, Henry Kissinger described the 1971 meeting between Richard Nixon and Gandhi as 'the two most unfortunate meetings Nixon had with any foreign leader' (Kissinger, 1979). 'The lack of real warmth in mutual relations' between the two nations was further exacerbated by India's strong condemnation of the Vietnam War, US opposition to India's first nuclear tests in 1974, contested International Monetary Fund loans, and especially the American press' trenchant criticisms of Indira Gandhi's highly controversial Declaration of Emergency in 1975 (Ford Foundation, 1982; Geyelin, 1985: A-21; Nagarajan, 1980: 67). According to a *Washington Post* article, the United States, Indians believed, was intent on sabotaging India's key interests of securing pre-eminence in the region and of being recognized as a major player in international diplomacy (Geyelin, 1985: A-21).[2]

With Indira Gandhi's significant defeat in the 1977 general elections, however, Indo-US relations gradually began to improve. The US Senate Foreign Relations Committee proposed the revocation of aid-restrictions; expressions of goodwill were made during the respective visits of Jimmy Carter and Indian prime minister Morarji Desai in 1978; and the Indo-US Joint Commission, comprising the Education and Cultural Subcommission, was revived and began to expand bilateral cooperations.[3] So too did the troubled Indian economy in the early 1980s become more receptive to an American helping hand. With domestic inflation at 15 per cent, industrial output stagnant, the outcome of the race

[2] The Emergency imposed by Indira Gandhi for a twenty-one-month period between 1975 and 1977 is one of the most contentious periods of postcolonial Indian history. Comprising the imprisonment of Gandhi's political opponents, cancellation of elections, censorship of the press, and suspension of civil liberties, the emergency facilitated an imagined political 'alternative' in the Janata Party in 1977.

[3] The Education and Cultural Subcommission, one of four subcommissions created to further bilateral cooperations, was formed in 1974 by the Indian and US governments to develop priorities and programs in the fields of the performing and fine arts, education, sports, museums, and libraries. Comprising eminent members from government, universities, and private organizations (such as the Indian 'cultural matriarch' Kapila Vatsyayan and subsequent ambassador to India John R. Hubbard), it was, significantly, the only Subcommission housed outside US government offices at the Rockefeller funded Asian Cultural Council (ACC) headquarters in New York (Indo-US Subcommission on Education and Culture).

between food and population uncertain, a balance of payments in deficit by $3.5 billion, and domestic tensions arising from competing demands, vigorous and serious attempts commenced in the 1980s to 'transform India from a restrictive trade regime to a liberal trade economy' (Ford Foundation, 1982; National Intelligence Estimate, 1983: 2). Propelled by disillusionment with the poor outcome of decades of preference for import substitution over international trade, Gandhi, a US intelligence report (1983) argued, had been cautiously reassessing long-standing Indian policies to promote faster economic growth and enhance India's regional and international status (National Intelligence Estimate, 1983: 1). Now 'enthusiastic about Western technology and . . . willing to see what the private sector [could] accomplish under relaxed controls', she began to not only adopt deliberate policies to deregulate the economy but also 'expand India's ties with the West . . . to reduce somewhat the imbalance in India's relations with the superpowers' (Ford Foundation, 1982; National Intelligence Estimate, 1983: 1, 7).

Simultaneously, however, an Indian Ministry of External Affairs report detailed that with Ronald Reagan's inauguration, attempts to re-establish US superiority in South Asia through hard and soft power were anticipated (Ministry of External Affairs, 1981: 5). The South Asian region, a US national security report described, had increased in strategic significance after the Soviet expansionary thrust into Afghanistan and the collapse of the Shah in Iran (National Security Division Directive 147, 1984: 1). Moreover, Reagan's pre-election announcements clarified that aid would only be given to close friends who fought protectionism, and that economic policy, technology transfer, and issues of nuclear proliferation would be 'integrated into the fundamental bedrock of what politically [was] in the best interest of the United States' (Free Trade Endorsed by Reagan, 1984: 5; Nagarajan, 1980: 67). Although US bilateral commitments to India had not been significant in the 'holding period' of the 1970s, it was largely US money that had been channelled to India through the World Bank and the International Development Association (Ministry of External Affairs, 1981). The report therefore expressed anxiety, in the midst of a global debt crisis, that US assistance from all channels would be seen solely through the prism of US objectives and that substantial Republican support to Pakistan ('a major problem for India') was imminent (Ministry of External Affairs, 1981).

In a series of letters to Gandhi in 1981, the political advisor Promod Datta argued that a US tilt to Pakistan could be 'easily countered by intelligent handling of US emotions'. Friendly relations could be effortlessly achieved through 'a process of mutual consultations on unimportant matters only as our

views on important matters differ substantially' (Datta, 1981a, emphasis in original). 'A mass publicity campaign' depicting India's 'progress and point of view', he averred, must be launched in the United States to 'influence the American people at large', as the US government gave considerable importance to public opinion (Datta, 1981b). This need for a tactical publicity campaign was further reiterated in the external affairs report that described the exigency of calculated ambiguity: 'maintaining dialogue and maximizing understanding rather than highlighting the differences' between the two nations (Ministry of External Affairs, 1981: 9). Consequently, during her 'virtuoso performance' in the United States in July 1982 (baptized by the press as 'Operation Defrost'), the former 'dragon-lady . . . out-Reaganed Ronald Reagan' by proposing along with bilateral initiatives on themes as wide-ranging as agricultural research, biomass energy, health, and commercial relations, the designation of 1984 and 1985 as a period of special focus in cultural exchange (Badhwar, 1982; Statement for Noon Press Briefing, 1982).

This proposal was readily accepted by the Americans who believed that enhanced US relations with India would 'weaken Soviet influence in the subcontinent and undermine Moscow's subjugation of Afghanistan' while preventing Gandhi from 'implicat[ing] the US in her increasing domestic problems' (National Security Division Directive 147, 1984: 1). The United States, an intelligence report averred, could 'take advantage of Mrs. Gandhi's presence [. . . for] the Festival . . . to arrange appropriate high level meetings in Washington' where the following strategic objectives could be realized:

- raise the level of Indian apprehensions about the long-term Soviet threats to the Subcontinent . . . .
- conclude . . . a memorandum of understanding regarding technology transfer . . . .
- . . . reduce India's military supply and economic dependence on the USSR [. . . through discussions on . . .] cooperative technology transfer and arms sales . . . .
- . . . establish clear guidelines aimed at facilitating future export license applications for India . . . .
- Demonstrate support for India's economic development by minimizing further decline in U.S. aid to India.
- Encourage the inclusion of non-proliferation in the Indo-Pak security dialogue. (National Security Division Directive 147, 1984: 3–4)

Thus, long before Americans who had 'little opportunity to learn about India' saw the film *A Passage to India* or the television series *The Jewel in the Crown*, preparations began for the 'year of India', an 'unprecedented, nationwide

celebration' spanning ninety cities (Bennetts, 1985: C 17; Reagan, 1983; September PCR Cover Story, 1985). While in the United States, administrative preparations commenced at the Rockefeller Foundation based Indo-US Subcommission, India's First Lady of Handicrafts and curator of Gandhi's saris, cultural bureaucrat Pupul Jayakar, began conceptualizing the festival's artistic vision – the 'total' face of India – calculated to 'leave a permanent impact on the American mind' (Dasgupta, 1985: 12–13).

2 'All the Raj: India Is In, and Everyone's Going Subcontinental'

> It was almost New Year's and the elite of New York fashion was in a dither. The world was about to enter 1985 and there was no trend. . . . Fashionable folk all over the city found themselves with nothing to wear. . . . So they sat home and watched TV. . . . And that's where the inspiration hit. India! . . . Nehru jackets, turbans, richly colored brocade vests; all began making an appearance on the late-night circuit. . . . Now, it seems we are poised on the edge of an all-out style craze. In Paris last fall, designer Jean-Paul Gaultier showed turbans and sarongs for men and women. In London, Scott Crolla revived the Nehru suit. . . . And fashion mogul Diana Vreeland is focusing on court costumes for her next show at the Metropolitan Museum's Costume Institute. 'It's a mood, a feeling,' says Koos van den Akker. 'People need a story to dress by, and this year it's India.'
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> (Harden, 1985)

Indira Gandhi's brutal assassination on 31 October 1984 and the Bhopal gas tragedy – one of the world's worst industrial disasters – in December of the same year had done little to dampen the spirit of the 'most expensive and stately cultural diplomacy extravaganza ever shared by two nations' (Sweeney, 1985). From Bergdorf Goodman's and Bloomingdale's special Indian home furnishing promotions featuring Indian designer 'Asha's' and Issey Miyake's cushion covers, to the overnight rise to fame of Madhur Jaffrey's 'curries' and 'stews', to Yves Saint Laurent's and Paloma Picasso's work with Indian craftsmen, to the new Indian theme at New York's hottest nightclub Nirvana One, India was unmistakably 'the "in" topic on the cultural front' (Rea, 1985). 'The Himalayas, the great Ganges Plain, reed-thin holy men, turban-topped snake charmers, the Taj Mahal, the Kutb Minar, the mountain caves of Ajanta, . . . and the pith helmeted Britons snacking on cucumber and watercress sandwiches beneath the giant banyan trees . . .': these and countless other images were on the collective minds of all 'Westerners' (Rea, 1985). Almost overnight, 'millions of Americans had become aware of the richness of India'.[4]

[4] Joan Sands, a public relations executive, reported that contacts through media reached 920 million (Festival of India, n.d.)

Thus began a new 'era of greater understanding for India' (India, n.d.). Though the elephants stayed at home (despite an express request from the San Francisco Zoo) (Laetsch, 1985), 'the colossal "Festival of India" . . . like some fabled maharajah's caravan of elephants – painted with flowered paisleys, bridled with jewels – bearing priceless gifts . . . [began its] solemn march across the United States' (Sweeney, 1985).[5] Described as the 'total spectrum' of Indian culture, the festival comprised exhibitions, film and fashion shows, poetry readings, academic seminars, and department store promotions (Bennetts, 1985: C17). Some of these events included exhibits of: masterpieces of Indian sculpture at the National Gallery, Washington; paintings from the fourteenth to the eighteenth centuries at the Metropolitan Museum of Arts; the artistic achievements of the court of the Mughal emperor Akbar at the Asia Society; contemporary handwoven textiles at the Smithsonian; Kushana and Gandhara sculptures at the Cleveland Museum; antique and contemporary terracotta works at the Brooklyn Museum; and science and technological achievements in Minneapolis (Festival of India USA, n.d.). So too did the megafestival boast of 'the largest showcase of Indian performing arts ever assembled outside India' (Bennetts, 1985; Dasgupta, 1985). In addition to the 1500 stone and bronze artefacts dating from 3000 BC to AD 1300, India, the American press noted, had sent several hundred artists, craftsmen, dancers, musicians, and poets to perform (Winship, 1985).

Accordingly, on 13 June 1985, the 'massive, unprecedented' festival opened with Ravi Shankar, Ali Akbar Khan, Zakir Hussain, and a Kathakali dance troupe taking the stage at the Kennedy Center, Washington DC. Arguably, however, the real performers at this invitation only event were the *haut monde* of Indian and US society: the Kissingers, Weinbergers, Schultzs, and especially the Gandhis. As a special *India Today* report detailed, 'Though the stars of the evening were supposed to be on the stage, it was again Rajiv who stole the show. As the Gandhis and the Bush's slipped into their box, the audience turned around and broke into thunderous applause and a visibly embarrassed Rajiv smiled and waved back' (Trehan, 1985b). The opening concert set an influential precedent as to how this elaborate diplomatic theatre was to unfold. More than seven hundred events in towns and cities in forty-three states absorbed high-profile statesmen, bureaucrats, and artists; global media; and thousands of unofficial visitors, everyone suited, greeted, and garlanded briefly metamorphosing into an actor as they stepped onto the stage of international politics before millions of spectators (Festival of India, n.d.).

[5] See also (Bumiller, 1985) and (Winship, 1985).